

An investigation into the interpreters' challenges in conflict zones: The case of Darfur region in Sudan

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Abstract

The study is aimed to investigate and shed light on some of the challenges encountered by local interpreters and language assistants working for UN peace-keeping missions, operating in conflict zones, namely in Darfur region, western Sudan. The study addresses the following research questions: what are the linguistic, social-cultural, mistrust and communication-related barriers that are encountered by interpreters and language assistants in conflict zones, how do they cope with these challenges, and what could be done to train them to handle such challenges and difficulties. The study adopted a qualitative methodology with semi-structured interviews being the main method of data collection. Twenty participants agreed to voluntarily take part in the investigation by allowing face-to-face interviews. Interview data was transcribed, coded and analyzed thematically. The results of data analysis showed that participants faced a range of challenges that negatively affected their job. They reported difficulties understanding and dealing with some social and cultural issues specific to the region. They also reported some serious life-threatening incidents ranging from physical and verbal attacks. For example, interpreters encountered hostilities from their fellow citizens accusing them of siding with enemy parties involved in the conflicts. Additionally, communication barriers were reported by participants as being the most salient challenge they experienced even when they interpreted accurately, as they would still encounter communication breakdowns caused by the inherent differences in the indigenous languages and varieties in addition to some cultural barriers. The paper offers some insights and implications for the conflict zones' interpreters' training and professional development.

Keywords: challenges, conflict zones, interpreter training, professional development, Sudan

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1. Introduction

There is a paucity in studies addressing the issues of interpreting in conflict zones. Baker (2010) highlights the infancy of the research in this area calling for more research to be conducted. Indeed, interpreting in conflict zones is an under-researched area, and to the best of our knowledge, there have been no studies on this topic in the region in general and in Sudan in particular. Interpreting in the conflict zones is a complicated and multi-faceted task involving a range of risks, challenges and difficulties. Interpreters often encounter difficult situations where they need a range of skills and specific training to deal with such situations. For example, remaining impartial is the most difficult barrier that an interpreter operating in conflict zones would face. Locally recruited interpreters are the key figures in conflict zones as they also function as cultural informants through giving advice on how to behave in certain situations, especially when religion and other sensitive cultural issues are involved in the interpreting process. Interpreters and translators working in conflict and war zones and very sensitive areas usually experience a number of risks and serious life-threatening incidents while going about their job. For example, they encounter hostilities from their fellow citizens amounting to fatalities in some extreme cases due to the job they handle. Being an interpreter or translator requires many professional, ethical and communication skills. One of the main tasks of the interpreter is to create new spaces for interaction between the two parties, whose languages and cultures are totally different, arrange meetings and offer linguistic mediation and assistance. These skills, tasks and requirements seem particularly indispensable for interpreters operating in war and conflict zones. Focusing on the Sudanese Darfur region, the overarching aim of this study is to investigate the challenges and barriers encountered by interpreters and language assistants operating in the conflict and war zones. Given the scarcity of research in this area and the lack of and need for specific training for interpreters operating in conflict zones, the study attempts to provide insights and implications that could inform the design, development and delivery of training programmes for conflict zone interpreters and language mediators.

2. Contextual background

Darfur is a vast area situated in the western part of the Republic of the Sudan. The region has witnessed an armed and brutal conflict and violence involving the central government in Khartoum and a number of armed factions from the region who revolted against the central government, making several demands. The conflict escalated dramatically in 2003, which later led to an international community intervention. The UN Security Council issued resolution number 1769 on 31st July 2007 to bring stability and peace to the war-torn region of Darfur. The resolution led to the formation of the United Nations and the African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) with the purpose of providing humanitarian assistance, peace-making and peace-keeping. The core mandate of UNAMID is the protection of civilians, contributing to security for humanitarian assistance, monitoring and verifying implementation of agreements, assisting an inclusive political process, contributing to the promotion of human rights and the rule of law, as well as monitoring and reporting on the situation along the borders with Chad and the Central African Republic. The

mission is formed of civil international personnel and military personnel. English is used as the official language of communication among the members of the mission.

Darfur is one of the biggest geographical regions in the country with an area of about 493,180km² and a population of approximately nine million.

The region is inhabited by a diverse range of ethnic groups, speaking a range of indigenous languages, along with Arabic spoken as the predominate language of communication (Lingua Franca) among these groups. These groups are broadly divided into two main divisions: Arab and non-Arab ethnic groups. UNAMID has recruited national and local interpreters and language assistants to facilitate their mission in the region. The main role of interpreters is to facilitate communication between the multiple parties involved in the conflict. Although most of these interpreters and language mediators are professionally qualified, they would still encounter a range of cultural, linguistic and social challenges which hinder them performing their role effectively. The aim of this backdrop is to contextualize the study and to generally help readers understand and interpret the study findings and implications.

3. Theoretical background

This section offers a brief review of the key challenges reported in the literature about interpreting within the conflict zones. The purpose of this background is to contextualize the current study within the existing literature and to help in understanding and interpreting its findings. Although interpreting in conflict zones has played a vital role in the history of war, there is, however, a scarcity in research on translators and interpreters operating in conflict zones (Baker, 2010). Having surveyed the relevant literature, it was found that there is still a paucity in research on this area, particularly in the context of the present study. The challenges encountered by interpreters in conflict zones vary from linguistic, cross-cultural, cognitive, training-related and some other extralinguistic-related challenges. Interpreting as a profession is often associated with a range of challenges and difficulties regardless of whether it is conducted within conflict or non-conflict zones. There are a number of challenges reported in the literature (e.g., Amich, 2013; Baker, 2010; Bello, 2014; Dragovic-Drouet, 2007; Moser-Mercer et al., 2014; Valero-Garcés, 2003).

Moreover, the challenges encountered in the field of interpreting can broadly be classified into three categories: language and culture-related challenges, role-related challenges, and cognitive and emotional challenges. Concerning role-related challenges where interpreters are unable to resolve contradictions between the perceived needs of the interlocutors, and what they have understood from what is being said. They are unsure how to address contradictions between the humanitarian principles governing the organization they work for and their own understanding and perception of the expected role (Moser-Mercer et al., 2014).

In contrast, interpreters and translators working in conflict zones operate in difficult conditions which inevitably has an impact on their role, the quality of their work, their experience of the war and how they are viewed by the conflicting parties (Baker, 2010). Translators and interpreters recruited locally and ethnically who belong to the 'enemy' group are generally not

viewed by the other parties as trustworthy and reliable interlocutors (Baker, 2010, p. 210). The reason for distrusting the locally hired interpreters who belong to the 'enemy' community is because of their exposure to the public narratives which disfavour and depict them negatively. Moreover, mistrust of translators and interpreters in the conflict zones is often based on their ethnicity. The lack of mistrust in native wartime interpreters, including those who belong to the same ethnic group as the enemy, means their activities need to be closely watched and they should not be allowed to work independently. Some of the translators and interpreters who operate in the conflict zones also engage in a multitude of vital other tasks that have little to do with the type of linguistic mediation which they are hired for (Baker, 2010).

Furthermore, culture plays a significant role in interpreting as well as the consideration of other different attitudes within the society and its institutions (Valero-Garcés, 2003). Interpreters who work within community settings with participants of diverse cultural backgrounds may encounter challenges in conveying the target messages accurately due to cross-cultural differences. These cross-cultural differences range from pragmatolinguistic and sociopragmatic differences which go beyond the utterances (Hale, 2014). Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural conflict zone interpreters are often seen as an important strategic resource (Guo, 2015). Valero-Garcés (2003) mentions a range of difficulties encountered by linguistic and interlinguistic mediators such as problems in understanding dialects and specific accents. Moreover, there are also problems in understanding technical and semi-technical words when working with medical doctors and international forces. Additionally, interpreters faced some other extralinguistic and emotional challenges such as feeling uncomfortable with the topic of conversation; positionality problems such as which position to adopt when; being compliant with the clients or the providers; or remaining neutral and impartial. In addition, lack of familiarity with the context in which they operate and its people with whom they were working. Indeed, interpreters operating in high-risk environments are extremely vulnerable and require special protection. This vulnerability is not only due to risks and dangers involved but it is also due to the ambiguous positions they assume in such dichotomized conflict environments (Bello, 2014).

Although interpreting has become highly professionalized from the second half of the twentieth century, it has still, however, remained unregulated job in the conflict zones and often pursued by untrained interpreters (Ruiz, 2016). Finding trained interpreters who are able to speak and understand indigenous languages in conflict zones is sometimes extremely difficult, and the solution is usually hiring civilians in the deployment territories (Amich, 2013). This kind of recruitment can result in language services mediated by local interpreters which can lead to divided loyalties (Dragovic-Drouet, 2007). These interpreters are often recruited not because they have been trained as translators or interpreters, but because they know the local languages/dialects as well as English, which is the dominant language in international relief operations (Amich, 2013). Therefore, having untrained interpreters is currently a sensitive topic.

Yet, another challenge peculiar to interpreters in conflict zones, is the lack of training in essential professional skills, professional ethics, crisis management skills and adequate cultural awareness to perform their tasks adequately. Interpreters and translators need to be impartial and

invisible to effectively function in the conflict settings. Additionally, interpreters are expected to have multi-lingual communication and professional skills on the ground to help provide humanitarian assistance, peace-making and peace-building (Amich, 2013). Interpreters without training cannot meet the needs of multi-lingual communication scenarios and parties (Moser-Mercer et al., 2014).

Moreover, language and cultural competence in at least two languages constitute the bedrock of good interpretation. Interpreters must be able to analyze the communication scenarios, identify the intention of the parties and formulate statements without adding or subtracting anything, unless to bridge a cultural gap and to transfer the messages more successfully. The professional ethics of translators and interpreters require them to adhere to strict confidentiality of what they are interpreting. Breaching any of the principles of professional ethics has the potential of creating mistrust (Baker & Maier, 2011; Moser-Mercer et al., 2014). One of the important things which must be taken into consideration when designing translator and interpreter training programmes is the emphasis on accountability which is the key area of work in the professional world (Baker & Maier, 2011). To conclude, these challenges do not predominately exist in conflict zones only but some of them can be encountered within non-conflict zones due to the nature of the interpreting profession.

4. Methodology

The aim of this study is to investigate the barriers and challenges experienced by interpreters in conflict zones, namely, in the Darfur region in Sudan. The study seeks to answer the following questions: What are the linguistic, social-cultural, mistrust and communication-related barriers that are encountered by these interpreters and language assistants in these areas? How did they cope with these challenges, and what could be done to help them to train to cope with and handle such challenges and difficulties?

The study adopts a qualitative methodology with semi-structured interviews being as the principal method of data collection. Twenty interpreters and language mediators took part in the investigation. All of them are Sudanese nationals with substantial interpreting and translation experience. The purpose is to identify the issues and challenges from the perspectives of the participants and to understand the meanings and their lived experiences regarding such barriers and challenges within the context in which they operate (Mason, 2002). The study attempts to investigate the participants' views and experiences to enable the researchers to gain a thorough understanding of participants' views, perspectives and experiences in a natural context (Kvale, 1996). The study also attempts to make a significant contribution to the research on interpreting in conflict zones. The rationale for choosing this sample is simply for practical reasons related to the difficulties in accessing the context as well as the limited number of the available interpreters in the context in question. The interview schedule consists of questions ranging from questions on interpreting challenges, coping strategies, memorable and funny experiences, to what could be done to help interpreters in the conflict zones to carry out tasks and duties more successfully.

The data was coded and analyzed thematically and inductively using the salient themes which were guided by the study's prior research questions and objectives (Miles & Huberman, 1994). One of the researchers was immersed in the setting of the study and he was able to have access to conduct the interviews with the study participants.

5. Results and discussion

In this section, the main results will be reported based on the study research questions. The most salient themes resulting from the coding of the data will be reported and the findings will be discussed and connected with the findings of the relevant studies in the literature.

5.1 Mistrust and linguistic challenges

Participants reported the challenge of being mistrusted by some parties in the conflict:

The first challenge in translation field in conflict zones is the absence of trust from the conflicting parties, that is to say the translator faces accusations of supporting another party of the conflict.

In addition to mistrust, linguistic challenges were also reported as another challenge:

We are mainly recruited to translate from Arabic to English and vice versa. However, in Darfur, there are many local dialects that encounter the translator even in one language (Arabic). Arab nomadic tribes speak different forms of Arabic and African tribes have their own local languages that is apart from Arabic and we [interpreters] need to deal with and accommodate all these languages and varieties.

Along the same line, the linguistic challenges in turn seem to cause communication barriers as echoed by one of the interpreters: "*Sometimes people cannot express themselves clearly and that may result in communication breakdowns*".

Another interpreter stated:

Well, actually there are cultural and linguistic barriers that have to do with the local tribes together with dialects and local languages. The style of the language used by people. Another difficulty is the English dialects used by foreigners who are coming from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds can be a barrier. One of the challenges that I had encountered with interpreting in conflict zones is that I feel there is no security. In non-conflict zones you feel safe, secure and calm.

Echoing Baker's (2010) study, it is clear from the above quotes that interpreters face a number of challenges and difficulties with regard to the issue of trust when operating in conflict zones. This kind of mistrust is likely to make them feel uncomfortable while doing their job and hence negatively affect their performance and professional identities.

The failure to understand the cultural and linguistic variations in the region could result in dissatisfaction with the quality of the interpreting provided:

The challenges that I faced were the violent and emotional reactions from the audience when they were not satisfied with my interpreting, claiming that I did not convey the message clearly.

These findings suggest that interpreters and language assistants faced both severe violence and unexpected emotional reactions from both the conflict parties when completing their interpreting task. It was noticeable that whenever one of the two parties was not satisfied with what was being conveyed, they would react immediately against the interpreter and this reaction could take any form of violence or verbal abuse.

Evidence from participants suggests that the cultural barriers are considered one of the salient challenges encountered by interpreters and language assistants working in Darfur region. As the tribes have their own dialects and languages which are not always understandable to the interpreters who have no background information on these ethnic groups and their languages, it can be noted from the extracts that the kind of English dialects and accents used by foreign troops who come from diverse countries and backgrounds was also a challenge for interpreters in understanding them. Evidence from data shows that the lack of safety and security which interpreters experienced was a significant challenge for them. The situation made it even more difficult for them to do their job in a safe and friendly environment.

Findings on interpreters' linguistic barriers in conflict zones also resonate with the findings of some previous studies (e.g., Bello, 2014; Valero-Garcés, 2003) in that it is not uncommon to find problems with understanding the local dialects spoken by different groups who inhabit the conflict areas. In an interesting contrast with the previous studies, in the case of the present study, although all the interpreters in the conflict zone are Sudanese, they still find it difficult to understand and communicate with local people as the vast majority of them are from non-Arab backgrounds and they speak hybrid and simplified forms of Arabic, which are full of jargon and local vernaculars that interpreters need to master and accommodate.

Furthermore, participants also reported that the challenge of mistrust can sometimes be triggered by the interpreters' ethnic and social class affiliation. Interpreters are repeatedly accused of being spies for one of the conflicting parties of the region – either the government or military groups – depending on their appearance and ethnicity. They are crudely labelled according to their colour or complexion. Light-skinned interpreters are likely to be labelled “Janjaweed”, one of the conflicting groups who mostly support the government. Dark-skinned interpreters are likely to be labelled as “Torabora”, who mostly considered as pro-rebelling armed groups:

One of the challenges is the way that conflicting parties treat the interpreters. They look at them as spies to each other. In other words, every party accuses you as working for the other side. In Darfur as an interpreter you are treated according to your colour of your complexion. If you are a light-skinned person, you are likely to be considered and labelled as “Janjaweed” government militants or if you are dark-skinned you will be considered as “Torabora” which is mostly the rebel supporting group. For example, the first day for me in Darfur in my first interpreting session, one of the rebel leaders did not allow me to

interpret requesting the Head of UNAMID “*don't allow this light-skinned guy to do the interpreting*”.

Mistrusting and targeting interpreters based on their ethnicity is evident in the extract below. This clearly suggests that interpreters' affiliation to ethnic groups and tribes can constitute a risk for them if they become identified by the two conflicting parties. What can be inferred here is that if interpreters disclose their identity, ethnic group or tribe, they are likely to put themselves in danger and at risk and they may even lose their lives:

One of the challenges that I will never forget was that during a tribe conflict in the region unfortunately my tribe was one of those involved in that conflict, I had to translate the meeting in the UNAMID office mission leader and a head of other tribe, they told the mission officer that I am from their enemy tribe and that they did not want me to interpret the meeting. The argument caused the meeting to be delayed for more than one hour as the mission leader insisted that no one else would do the interpreting but me.

Along the same line, participants also reported concerns when encountered by security forces enquiring about their identities and roles:

It was a challenge for me when travelling with the UNAMID teams and convoys visiting places and camps across the region. We would often get interrupted by security forces and most often they would check on us and ask questions and the like. The atmosphere in most cases was tense.

These findings echo Baker's (2010) findings in that interpreters in conflict zones could encounter challenges due to their ethnic backgrounds and the association with some parties of the conflict. The findings clearly suggest the need for incorporation of a specific kind of training and guidelines to be used and followed by both interpreters and interpreters' employers in conflict zones where ethnic tension is high and there is a lot at stake.

5.2 Interpreting in conflict zones as a high-risk career

Participants reported safety and security concerns and hazards often associated with the interpreters' operations in conflict zones. These concerns were reported to have a potentially negative impact on the interpreters' professional work as well as their own lives due to the life-threatening incidents they are exposed to.

An interpreter stated:

The work environment in conflict zones has negative consequences upon interpreters' and translators' output. Whereas, non-conflict zones comparatively far better – but most of the time there are no computers or designated offices for the interpreters. Being under the supervision of the police or military compartments is a great problem because of the different mentality of both the civilian and military uniformed personnel. We encountered

technical and psychological barriers but serving as an interpreter or language assistant or even translator in conflict zones is an extraordinary career choice as it is not an easy job as we work in a high-risk environment. It was difficult sometimes to facilitate interaction between parties while you are vulnerable to attacks. Translators, language assistants and interpreters in conflict zones place their lives at risk and there are many instances where some of them were kidnapped, threatened and tortured and even killed.

This clearly illustrates how dangerous interpreting in the conflict zones is. It is quite evident that interpreters expose themselves to risks such as kidnapping, torture and even losing their lives due to the risk associated with such demanding, challenging and risky job. This suggests that interpreters in the war and conflict zones need special kind of training that can enable them to carry out their tasks and responsibilities more effectively and professionally due to the specific challenges that their job presents to them. These findings, unsurprisingly, resonate with the findings reported by Bello's (2014) study in that interpreters' lives are at increased risk when operating in conflict zones. Interpreters in the present study, however, experienced unique kinds of threats due to the different nature and the multiple parties involved in the conflict, which makes it particularly different to the other types of conflict reported in previous studies, including Bello's study which predominantly reported on conflicts characterized by dichotomous conflict environments.

Furthermore, interpreters are sometimes reportedly faced with direct risks and life-threatening incidents:

I remember I was working as language assistant with the UNAMID in Darfur back in 2005 and one day we were patrolling some places and towns to meet and interact with the conflict's internally displaced people. As soon as we went to some camps, we saw everybody there holding traditional weapons such as stones, sticks and hammers, knives, swords, spears, etc. We saw them running towards us. But our commander gave instructions to soldiers to drive back quickly and he contacted the police to know the reason. The answer was that people were targeting the UNAMID personnel believing that they brokered an unfair agreement mediated by a number of African leaders and the displaced people were not happy with the outcome of that agreement.

This suggests the dissatisfaction expressed by some of the local people with some agreements reached to end the conflict and they expressed their anger through attacking the international troops as well as their local assistants, including interpreters. This is a clear life-threatening incident that interpreters can experience in conflict zones. They could have been murdered if they had not had the chance to escape.

5.3 Lack of cultural awareness

Furthermore, participants reported the lack of cultural awareness about the Darfur region and its ethnic groups, social fabric and tribes as a challenge for interpreters working in the region.

Tribalism was one of the most dominant phenomena in that particular region. The region is inhabited by a diverse range of ethnic groups and they have been in conflict with each other for a long time. This conflict seems to have negatively impacted the interpreting process and sometimes interpreters are accused of being unfair and dishonest when interpreting between parties. This kind of accusation may lead to fatal consequences where interpreters can be subjected to torture, verbal abuse and even death in some extreme cases:

The lack of cultural awareness, tribalism and the local authorities in terms of their abuses. In non-conflict zones the situation is completely different where the interpreters feel calm and confident which has a positive reflection on the translation process and the quality of the output.

In a similar vein, some interpreters reported difficulties understanding culture-specific proverbs and sayings:

I remember a case in which I was involved in an oral interpretation between UN personnel and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) where the UN personnel was asking the IDPs if they could voluntarily return to their places of origin. One IDP replied with a simple proverb (*You couldn't put a sandal on donkey's back when it sees the wolf*). I have faced so many challenges and difficulties due to the fact that I am working with two conflicting parties and each one wanting me to convey his message the way they wished.

What can be inferred from the above quote is that interpreters experienced cultural barriers in understanding and translating some of the cultural-specific proverbs such as "*You couldn't put a sandal on donkey's back when it sees the wolf*". Moreover, the conflicting parties put pressure on interpreters to convey their messages in the way they liked which is impossible at some points in time. Interpreters working in conflict zones encounter a number of challenges which can be cultural, social, linguistic, political, etc.

These findings corroborate Valero-Garcés' (2003) findings in that cultural awareness of the interpreters in conflict zones plays an essential role in effective interpreting and thus the lack of such awareness, as we have seen in the findings of the present study, could cause challenges to interpreters. Such findings suggest that any training intended for interpreters working in conflict zones should attend to these cultural issues. Moreover, interpreters are sometimes faced with increased difficulties in conveying meaning due to the nature of the technicality of register or the jargon being used. For example, participants reported challenges when mediating between medical doctors and local medical care seekers in conflict zones:

I started my work as interpreter in 2005 in "X Camp" for refugees and other refugee camps in Darfur. My interpreting work was mostly in the medical field and I worked as a language mediator between the medical doctors and refugees. The most obvious challenge was to interpret between the people being affected by wars and a doctor who

needed an answer for his questions. Consequently, I had to read on sociology and psychology in order to convey people's messages who were psychologically affected. Interpreting discipline-specific terminologies seems to cause significant challenges due to the high technicality of terms, conventions and genres of certain disciplines. The findings suggest that conflict zones' interpreters encountered exceptional difficulties when mediating between medical doctors and patients who are psychologically affected and traumatized by wars and conflicts. Such situations are likely to create highly emotional and complicated atmosphere with potential negative implications on the quality and the outcomes of interpreting.

5.4 Coping strategies

Participants reported a range of coping strategies that they would use to survive and perform their job effectively. They employ a number of coping strategies according to the type and nature of the barriers they experience. For example, concerning cultural challenges, they seek induction and advice from colleagues and other people from the local areas where they operate:

There were unknown cultural and linguistic barriers I encounter; I usually depend on those who are around the areas where interpreting is going to try and overcome them. To deal with such challenges, I had induction courses related to certain environments, whether cultural background or security related to avoid catastrophes. I searched for more consultations with my colleagues and others in the mission. To do your best to cope with the barriers and familiarise myself with the elements of that given culture.

I did my best to be close to the community and it did not take long to be familiar with these barriers. I think effective induction and briefing could save the day. In our organization we have Arabic speakers who do not understand the local Arabic which means that I have to interpret from Arabic into formal and standard Arabic. I use the community itself to help with some areas, I learn from my previous experience and fight for the best.

This suggests the importance of having an induction or training prior to interpreting assignment. It is clear that asking for advice from locals and colleagues to help deal with cultural and linguistic difficulties seems to be an important survival strategy used by interpreters in conflict zones. Indeed, being close to the local community could also help interpreters to immerse themselves into the community and understand them in a better way. Interestingly, the findings suggest that not all Arabic speakers can understand the dialectal Arabic that exists in some parts of Darfur due to the variations between Arabic dialects. This in turn suggests that the mastering of standard Arabic alone by interpreters is not enough to effectively interpret in conflict zones. As an interpreter it is important to understand the local dialects in order to interpret effectively and efficiently.

Developing good listening and comprehension skills was also reported among the coping strategies:

The most important thing is to develop your listening skills to understand both parties carefully in order to create conducive atmosphere of communication. This needs good translation techniques and awareness. You should listen carefully to the parties of

communication and understand the messages perfectly before the translation process, i.e. don't translate unless you make sure that you understood the message.

It is noticeable that interpreters' listening skills are crucial in doing the job successfully. Developing listening and comprehension skills would be the most successful factors in helping the translation and interpreting processes. Limited understanding of the messages of the two parties can drastically affect the quality of interpreting.

5.5 Supporting interpreters in the conflict zones

When asked about what can be done to help them operate effectively in the conflict zones, participants reported a range of potential training needs and requirements:

The interpreters/translators should be patient, ambitious and hard-working in order to familiarize themselves with the work atmosphere. Training, raising cultural awareness and exposing yourself to similar situations. What could be done to overcome such challenges is good training related to how to handle these barriers and challenges and continuing learning local and indigenous languages. For the psychological barriers, taking rest from time to time and exercising could reduce the stress.

This illustrates that some of the interpreters were aware of the importance of training in helping them to do their job successfully. It is apparent that training and enculturating translators and interpreters on how to deal with unexpected cultural-specific, social and linguistic challenges can have potential positive impact on the interpreting process. Learning to speak indigenous languages could also facilitate the interpreting process and help interpreters survive in their jobs and avoid dangers.

Along the same line, participants also stressed the importance of both linguistic and cultural training, and they called for the recruiters to provide such training for their staff who work in the conflict zones including training on local cultures, traditions, values and languages to avoid unnecessary misinterpretations. Indeed, familiarity with local everyday linguistic terms could ease the interpreting process and save time and effort. Cultural and linguistic awareness should be a fundamental component of any training intended for interpreters in conflict zones:

The UNAMID should provide intensive courses to the staff in the field of local culture and languages to avoid conflict that can appear as the result of misinterpretation. You should keep in touch with the locals as much as you can to be familiar with local terms and languages to carry out your job well.

In a similar vein, participants also suggested the role of individual efforts and initiatives to help interpreters operate effectively in the conflict zones.

An interpreter reported his coping strategies:

For the language and cultural barriers, you have to acquaint yourself with the local languages especially in the region like Darfur with 80 different ethnic groups. But the good thing is that all of these groups have many people who can speak Arabic, so you have to find someone to link you with the community. I remained calm and focused in

order to avoid any kind of misinterpretation. Speakers have to simplify their message to match the intended audience.

Once again, this suggests that interpreters could take the initiative and acquaint themselves with the local culture, languages and dialects to be able to carry out their interpreting tasks and duties. These findings also show that Darfur is a linguistically diverse region, but most of the Darfuris speak Arabic, whether standard or dialectical Arabic, which sometimes requires some sort of simplification of the intended message to accommodate and cater for the local audience who are mostly uneducated.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This was a small-scale qualitative study intended to investigate the interpreters' and language mediators' challenges and barriers in conflict zones in Darfur region, Sudan. Interpreters reportedly experienced numerous challenges and difficulties that impacted on their performance. Certainly, there are some limitations with this study which merit consideration. The most obvious limitation is the number of participants who took part in this study which was only 20, and this could impede any attempts for generalization. The study also used only interviews for data collection while the use of other additional methods such as field observations and follow-up questionnaires might have offered more analytical perspectives. However, we believe that the insights gained from the study are illuminating and could be transferable to other similar contexts and could also help inform the design and development of training programmes for interpreters operating in conflict zones. In the light of the study findings, some recommendations can be offered. First, interpreters and translators in conflict zones need to be more diplomatic and mindful of the contexts in which they are doing the job to avoid any potential negative consequences. Second, in addition to the generic and professional skills necessary for interpreting, any interpreting training programmes intended for interpreters operating within conflict zones should incorporate aspects on cross- and inter-cultural communication to help interpreters to be more culturally cognizant. Third, training should take into consideration context-specific needs and realities in order to successfully suit the context and cater for interpreters. Fourth, interpreters themselves need to be proactive and take the initiative to enculturate and familiarize themselves with the domestic cultural, linguistic, social, religious and historical realities. Fifth, employers of interpreters in conflict zones should organize pre- and in-service induction and training sessions covering all these issues. Sixth, employers should consider taking precautions against the potential risks of employing locals who might belong to either of the conflicting parties and whose identity identification, during their assignment, might result in fatal consequences. To minimize the risks, interpreters could conceal their identities in certain cases or could work invisibly behind the scenes to avoid dangers. Finally, training courses should also emphasize the professional ethics in interpreting and other issues such as maintaining neutrality, impartiality, confidentiality and context-sensitivity for interpreting in war and conflict zones.

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